

Graduation Address, The Career Academy
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Creating Careers – Creating Legends

My Grandson Jared is a special 5 year old who is in love with the movie, the Polar Express. And for those of you who know the story, there is a remarkable line by Tom Hanks, the conductor of the train, who says to one of the young riders, “It almost doesn’t matter where the train is going, as long as you get on board!”

Getting on board takes courage and commitment. And that’s what you graduates bring tonight – courage and commitment. And I offer my congratulations and every best wish for your success. Congratulations, too, to the instructors and staff of the Career Academy, and to all the parents and siblings who provided the love, support and encouragement to each of the graduates.

Now Alaska is a remarkable place, one of the most special places on the planet. It’s special because of the people who have made it so. This past year we’ve lost several of our heroes, our legends, Governor Jay Hammond, Herbie Nayakpuk (the Shishmaref Cannonball, and way prematurely, Susan Butcher.

What you may not realize is that each of you has the capacity and spirit to become an Alaskan legend – in your own way, to move us forward as a society. And to me, that’s what your Career Academy diplomas represent. Not just a testament that you’ve mastered your craft, but that you’re prepared and willing to use your newly minted skills to continue to help make this community and our world a better place than when you found it.

Consider that a Wasilla High School graduate now holds the reigns as our youngest governor. Consider that a West High graduate just today docked the Space Shuttle to the International Space Station. You are now on the same journey, the same train of opportunity.

HG Wells once said that civilization is in a race between education and catastrophe. Despite our troubled world situation, when I meet graduates like you, and institutions like the Career Academy, I’m buoyed by the hope that education is indeed winning the race. We have to. The stakes are simply too high for failure.

And this brings me to my themes tonight – I do have some. I think every commencement speaker needs to give you some simple themes you can take away, and I’m about to give you mine. First, a quick story, however to illustrate the point. How many of you have stayed in Hilton hotels? The Hilton Empire was build by the late Conrad Hilton. Late in life, he was a guest on The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson (you do know who Johnny Carson is, don’t you?). During the interview, Carson said, “Mr. Hilton, you are a giant

of American attainment, a legend in your time, you've built hotels all over the world, turn to that camera right over there, look your fellow countrymen in the eye and tell them the one thing, based on your life's work that you would like your fellow countrymen to know." Like a great trooper, Hilton turned to the camera, looked America in the eye and said, "Please put the curtain inside the tub."

Now I'm afraid I have more than one theme; in fact, I have ten of them – but I'll give them to you as Johnny Carson, Jay Leno and David Letterman would – in a "top 10" list of lessons for life; foot stompers that I hope you remember, take with you, and put into practice. Hopefully, some of these will resonate with you --

#10

Talk with your parents. I know you're at an age where you think you're the first generation to discover sex, drugs and rock and roll. But believe me, your parents have been where you are now, and they even know what happens next! Talk to them – ask them about their own successes and failures in live and love and finances; the lessons they've learned will save you amazing heartache.... Talk to them; you'll be surprised by what you learn!

#9

This one's from our son Bobby - **Be civil.** America has lost its way in terms of civil discourse, whether on the freeway, in the boardroom or in the Assembly chamber. We must engage in spirited debate and informed discourse; that's what our Republic demands. But we can do so civilly. Listen to Miss Manners and be civil.

#8

Be proud, but humble that you're an American. We are the most effective democracy on the planet, and millions of people wish they could join our exclusive club. But remember our strength rests in our diversity of thought and color and ideas. Be tolerant to other ways of life, here and around the world. Vote, run for office, join the military, and participate in our great experiment.

#7

Never Stop Learning. I hope you embrace lifelong education. The old paradigm of spending our first 21 years in school, followed by 40 odd years of work, followed by a cruise, moving to Florida and dying is totally obsolete.

Our world is changing before our eyes, and we need you smart, prepared and ready to contribute. China, for example, is on the move. I've traveled in China three times so far. It's not rickshaws and rice paddies; its high technology and very motivated young people who know their time on the world's stage is at hand. And they want your jobs! Did you know that last year in China more students took the SAT test in English than American students took the SAT test in English?? I highly recommend Thomas Friedman's book, *The World is Flat*. I took my first Mandarin course last fall, and I hope you have too.

#6 Set Goals and Dream, but Let People Know!

I know you have goals and dream about your future, but have you let the right people know? This is one of the single most important keys to success in life.

One of the highlights of my military career was commanding a flying squadron in the Alaska Air National Guard. I flew with some of the finest professionals in the world, and as their leader, I helped create many opportunities for them – that’s what a leader does.

Years later, the senior officer who appointed me told me that what made the difference and why I got the job is that I was the only candidate to tell him I wanted the job! Once you tell people your dreams, they will start thinking about you differently, and the right opportunities will come your way. Dream big, but don’t keep those dreams a secret!

#5

Be Persistent! And when you have a dream, never take no for an answer.

Former President Calvin Coolidge has a marvelous quote – “Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent. The slogan “Press On” has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race.”

#4 Always be prepared to lead. One of the lessons I hope you’ve learned from the horrific events of September 11th, 2001, is that leaders make a difference, at all levels. And just as 9/11 came as a bolt out the blue, you’ll never know when it suddenly will be your turn to be in charge....

Fortunately, I first learned this lesson when I was 14, and on the freshman cross-country team. When I was growing up, I didn’t see myself as a leader... I was a follower. The race took us over an unfamiliar golf course, and about halfway through the race, something happened that, in my wildest dreams, I had never anticipated – I was in the lead! No other runners were in front of me! Think of it – I had no idea where to run! I had never anticipated I would have to know the layout of the course, because I had always assumed I would follow other runners to the finish line. Well, guess what, that’s exactly what happened, I had to slow down, and be passed up by five runners because I didn’t know where the course went, because I wasn’t prepared to lead.

I’m passionate about leadership, because leaders make a profound difference for people and for an organization. Put the right leader in the right position, give some guidance, stand back, and watch good things cascade up, down, and throughout an organization. Put a caretaker in place, or worse, a bad leader, and the damage can be long lasting and even catastrophic. Always be prepared for your turn.

#3 Have Fun! The journey of life can be magical with a recipe of family and friends, a sense of humor and an ability to never take yourself too seriously. My sister Connie earned her degree when she was 70 years old, and is still working (her choice) at 87. She says her secret is always being able to laugh at herself and her situation. I commend her to you. Have fun!

#2 Character counts! (What a concept!) The Air Force has three simple core values that make excellent signposts for any responsible citizen – Integrity First, Service Before Self, and Excellence in All We Do. Your academy is devoted to Commitment to Excellence. These are not just bumper stickers; combine them with traditional values of love and forgiveness, and they are marvelous guideposts to live by.

You will face many temptations in your life and in your career, and there is genuine evil in this world – why do you think the Lord's Prayer emphasizes, "and lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil?"

You'll make mistakes and have failures along the way – but its what you do with them that counts. People of character learn more from their failures than from their successes. Character counts.

And no ethical shortcuts. I need to say this again, no ethical shortcuts.

The secret here is to understand your values and your moral compass now – in the calm times of your life. It's too late, otherwise, when the winds of ethical temptation blow. If you're not ethically grounded, you'll swing like a weathervane! If you know what your stand for now, in the calm times, you'll do fine in a crisis. Character counts.

#1 And the number one lesson I want you take away tonight is – please **Take Care of Each Other**. We're all we have. Connect the dots – in your personal life, in your professional dealings, in your civic life, connect the dots. Mentor and help each other. Be generous with your time, talent and treasure. Keep your family first.

Remember the story about the man who found himself deep in a hole with no way out. He cried for help, and a doctor came by. The doctor wrote out a prescription, tossed it down the hole, and left. Then a Priest came by. He wrote out a prayer, dropped it into the hole and left. Then a friend came by. He jumped down into the hole. "Why did you do that" the man said, "now we're both stuck here" "No", said the friend, "you see, I've been down here before.... and I know the way out!"

So that's my list for tonight -

- Talk with your parents; learn their lessons
- Be civil
- Be proud, but humble, to be an American
- Never stop learning
- Set Goals and Dream, but Let People Know
- Persistence is everything

- Always be prepared to lead
- Have fun!
- Character counts
- Take care of each other

You have each answered the call in Isaiah 6:8: “And the Lord said, whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, here am I, send me.”

And if you take away nothing else tonight, remember the immortal words of Dr. Seuss,

You have brains in your head,
You have feet in your shoes,
You can steer yourself
Any direction you choose.

Every best wish to you – and congratulations!